

There's no way you'll see me on a bus tour to Graceland. Well, at least not without shades. But I'm a devoted Elvis Presley fan. And not the closet kind, either.

My mom's to blame. She dragged me and my brothers to every Elvis movie made. How could I forget "GI Blues" and his antics at the Café Europa? And when I hear "Jailhouse Rock," I see Elvis dancing on his toes, in his striped prison shirt.

"The King" of rock and roll, no matter where people see him these days, still rules. So it was neat to see an Elvis shrine at the 85th Flying Training Squadron at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas. Undergraduate pilot training students of "Elvis" [that's right] Flight maintain the temple to the "sneering one." Elvis pictures, posters and other memorabilia cover the classroom walls. Elvis busts dressed in flight suits or sequins are everywhere. And on the ceiling, each class has added its own class patch design.

"The King," even in a helmet and purple outfit, rules at the 85th Flying Training Squadron "Elvis" Flight classroom. But all is not fun and games. Instructor pilots (left to right) 1st Lts. Brent Curtis and Zack Saurman keep students focused on their flight training.

I happened on the shrine while interviewing students about a classmate, 2nd Lt. Jozsef Jonas, who was born and raised in Hungary. I don't know if he likes Elvis, but I do know he's a young man on a mission. His trip to Laughlin has been one heck of a journey. His story is on Page 32.

I hung out in the classroom and observed. Students debrief after flights. Others stepped to their trainers for a sortie. Instructor pilots

— most as young as their charges — passed on nuggets of wisdom. They were taking care of important

business. I realized these are serious young people. With a serious attitude and a serious mission.

But, as they filed reports, checked flight times or leafed through "pubs," they also carried on a little side banter. Small talk, really. But the kind Elvis would have approved, for sure.

One guy walked in with his hair sticking straight up. Seems he put a "bit" of gel on his crew cut before a flight. His buddies razzed him about his helmet hair, of course. "I bet you sweat through your helmet," one said. "Nah, he's a cool customer," another said. Their target flashed

a big smile and ran his fingers through his hair. I didn't catch all his reply, but I heard "don't hate."

Then there were the cheesy mustaches. I asked 1st Lt. Brent Curtis, an "old man" of about 25, why he dared sport

such a scruffy mustache. Giving me his best "are-you-on-crack" look, he

said, "It's for the mustache march." Huh? The students — except the women, of course — compete to see who can grow the best mustache. I looked around to see the progress. Lots peach fuzz — not one had much to crow about. But, then, I never saw Elvis with a mustache.

"What do the women pilots do while you guys put on this testosterone spectacle?" I asked Lieutenant Curtis. The Air Force Academy grad shot me a quick answer, "They laugh at us, sir."

Good answer. One I know The King would have liked.

I learned a few things sitting there. One guy told me the best place to hang out if I ever got stuck at Vance Air Force Base, Okla. Another showed me a photo of his girl. Yet another told me the best place to grab a cold one in Del Rio. There was plenty of macho talk. But I could tell they were a tight group. The kind that had each other's back.

The Elvis motif was fitting. Elvis was the epitome of cool. Brash. Sure of himself. Not afraid to take risks. And he fought for his friends. These young pilots struck me as being just like that.

These Airmen are in some tough training. They put in 12-hour days and then study some more. Their environment is stressful and dangerous. They have to focus because they'll soon be flying multi-million dollar aircraft, and be responsible for people's lives. And most will fly into the thick of the global war on terrorism. America is depending on them.

Talk about stress. No wonder the Elvis shrine is important to these young people.

Back at my room at the Laughlin Manor [which is top-notch, by the way], I thought about the pilots I'd met. About how wide-eyed they are. These are some bright young people. Sharp. Eager. Focused. Dedicated. Serious when they have to be, but ready to laugh, too. And each one is ready to serve and defend their country. Just like Elvis did so long ago.

The King would certainly be proud of them.

— Louis A. Arana-Barradas

'The King' Lives

by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

